'Hallelujah Moment': How This City Overcame Its Lead Crisis

Lead pipes had tainted Newark's drinking water. Now it is close to replacing nearly all those lines.

By Kevin Armstrong
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NEWARK — When a police siren abruptly woke up Christopher Daniels one morning this spring, he rushed outside. A police officer ordered him to move his car.

But then the officer explained why: Contractors were there to replace the lead pipe that carried water into his century-old Victorian home in the North Ward of Newark.

Mr. Daniels, whose 4-year-old grandson had tested for elevated levels of lead in his blood when he was younger, was relieved. "This could have been disastrous on so many levels," he said. "It's an hallelujah moment.''

The work at Mr. Daniels's home is part of a remarkable milestone in New Jersey's largest city. Two years after Newark became the scene of one of the worst environmental disasters to strike an American city in decades, nearly all its 23,000 lead service lines, which had tainted the drinking water, have been replaced with copper pipes.

By contrast, Flint, Mich., which was also engulfed by a lead contamination crisis, has replaced roughly 10,000 lead service lines in five years. Crews estimate they have about 300 more to replace, but more than 2,500 households have not cooperated with the project, Melissa Brown, a spokeswoman for Flint, said.

The progress in Newark has been significant enough that the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group that filed a federal lawsuit accusing Newark and state officials of violating safe water laws, agreed to settle the claim in January because it was encouraged by the city's actions.

A piece of a lead water line. Scientists agree that there is no safe level of lead in water. Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

“It’s refreshing and welcome,” said Erik Olson, a senior director at the organization. “They certainly had a major turnaround from when there was a fair amount of downplaying of the problem to now having removed the vast majority of their service lines faster than just about any place else in the U.S.’’

The city has been able to sharply reduce the amount of lead in its water to below levels that the federal government says require action.

For the city’s mayor, Ras Baraka, the progress has provided a chance to exult after he was long accused of neglecting, mismanaging and denying the severity of the problem. At one point, he mailed a brochure to residents assuring them that the water quality met “all federal and state standards’’ despite evidence to the contrary.

Mr. Baraka acknowledged in an interview that the city’s ordeal and his handling of it was a painful learning experience.

“I had no knowledge of any of this stuff,’’ Mr. Baraka said. “I took it for granted.’’

He added: “I think for years people hadn’t invested in the water system the way they should have because it is incredibly costly, but it is a cost you are going to have to incur if you want to have quality water.”

Despite the progress, some community leaders still give the city low marks.

“Every little squiggle space that they could find and relieve themselves of accountability, that’s what they did,” said Sabre Bee, a founder of the Newark Water Coalition.

Newark’s 23,000 lead service lines, which had tainted the city’s drinking water, are being replaced with copper lines. Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

To pay for the project, Mr. Baraka turned to Essex County, which includes Newark, and $120 million in bonds were issued through the county’s improvement authority.

To move efficiently across the city of 285,000 residents, where 74 percent of the population are renters and landlords can be hard to trace, the city adopted an ordinance allowing it to replace lines without an owner’s consent.

To speed the work, laborers employ what contractors call a pull-through method instead of digging long trenches. At each site, a worker breaks ground by the curb and digs straight down near the water main beneath the street. At the same time, another worker in the basement excavates down to the service line.

By hand and machine, the lead line is pulled out to the street, while a copper pipe is pulled in behind it along the same path and connected to the water main.

Scientists agree that there is no safe level of lead in water and that lead can stunt a child's mental development.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency estimates that there are as many as 10 million lead water pipes across the country. A bipartisan infrastructure bill wending its way through Congress sets aside $15 billion for lead pipe replacement — far less than the $45 billion President Biden had proposed.

New Jersey has 350,000 lead service lines, according to the American Water Works Association, a nonprofit that focuses on water quality and supply, and in July, Gov. Philip D. Murphy signed bills requiring public water systems to inventory and replace lead service lines within 10 years.

The problem in Newark first came into focus in 2016 when elevated levels of lead were found in water at 30 public schools. The next year, the state's Department of Environmental Protection ordered extensive monitoring in the city's water, which revealed lead levels above the 15 parts per billion benchmark established by the E.P.A.

But Mr. Baraka continued to dismiss the severity of the issue, at one point posting comments on the city's website railing against "absolutely and outrageously false statements" about the water quality. The comments were eventually taken down.

In August 2019, the E.P.A. sent the city a stern letter, warning officials about the lead contamination and demanding that they take action. In response, the city told tens of thousands of residents to drink only bottled water and distributed thousands of water filters.

"I felt like I was in a movie where you go to the sheriff and he's in on it, everybody you go to for help, they're in on it," said Shakima Thomas, 39, a social worker who said her son, Bryce, 7, had lead detected in his blood. "It was very scary."

Whenever Bryce gets overly emotional or anxious, Ms. Thomas wonders whether lead exposure could be the cause.

Shakima Thomas, a social worker, said her son Bryce had lead detected in his blood. “It was very scary,” she said of the lead crisis that engulfed the city. Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

The city’s most ambitious initiative was tackling its aging lead pipes. Just finding some of the decades-old pipes was a challenge, requiring digging through mountains of utility records.

The city also mobilized a large work force, and as part of its agreement with private contractors, several dozen residents — many of whom had been unemployed — were hired and trained by a local union and paid up to $40 an hour as temporary workers.

The project started in March 2019 in all five of Newark’s wards, with roads closed and traffic rerouted. At the height of the work, crews switched out 125 lead service lines — some as long as 40 feet — every day.

The pandemic, which has claimed over 1,000 lives in Newark, complicated the schedule because some people were reluctant to open their doors to workers, but officials still expect to complete the project in the fall.

“The importance of Newark being a national model is because the community rose up and was screaming, so it is unfortunate that it took that to move the government at all levels,” said Yvette Jordan, a teacher and a member of Newark Education Workers Caucus, which was another plaintiff in the water quality suit.

As part of the settlement, Newark agreed to complete its lead pipe replacement, continue water testing and educate the public on using filters. The lead levels have fallen steadily since last year, and the latest readings, announced by the city in July, were 7 parts per billion.

A volunteer, Marcellis Counts, filled a water jug as part of a distribution event at a Newark church hosted by the Newark Water Coalition. Many residents are still leery of tap water. Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

“We are now viewed as a model city for lead abatement.’’ Mr. Baraka said in a statement.

Despite the city’s achievements, unease about the water supply persists. Every Saturday, Anthony Diaz, 35, another founder of the Newark Water Coalition, hangs a blue banner from the storefront of Alkaline Xpress Holistic Wellness Center that reads: “WATER IS A HUMAN RIGHT.”

At the wellness center and at a church in another neighborhood, Mr. Diaz fills jugs with filtered water and provides it free to residents so they do not have to buy bottled water. Between the two sites, he says he has distributed more than 11,000 gallons of filtered water since October.

“It really burns me up when people pay for water,” Mr. Diaz said.

On a recent afternoon, Adrina Sorhaindo, a 66-year-old retiree, picked up one jug for herself and another for a neighbor.

She would rather spend time picking up water because she said that as far as the water that comes out of her faucet was concerned, “I don’t trust it.”

Sabrina Hunte, 22, nodded. She grew up in Newark, graduated from Bowdoin College with a degree in environmental studies last year and was volunteering with Mr. Diaz.

“I feel like the local government is trying to rebuild the trust,” Ms. Hunte said, “but it’s going to take a long time.”

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